

Nigeria's Foreign Policy Responses to the Resurgence of Military Coups in West Africa, 2020 - 2025

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Abstract:

The resurgence of military coups in West Africa since 2020 has confronted Nigeria with a fundamental tension between its normative commitment to democratic governance and the operational necessity of engaging with unconstitutional regimes on its borders. This study examines Nigeria's foreign policy responses to military coups in West Africa between 2020 and 2025, assessing their effectiveness in promoting democratic governance and regional stability. Anchored on an eclectic theoretical framework combining Political Instability Theory and Realist Theory, the study adopted a qualitative, ex post facto design based on 50 purposively selected semi-structured elite interviews with Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials, military generals, parliamentarians, academic scholars, think tank analysts, journalists, and ECOWAS Commission officials, analysed thematically and triangulated with documentary sources. Findings show that the resurgence of coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon has significantly strained Nigeria's diplomatic relations with affected neighbours, with only 38 per cent of respondents judging relations to have remained largely intact. Nigeria's influence within ECOWAS and the African Union has been diminished by internal organisational divisions, competing regional powers, and the alternative external patronage networks, particularly Russian security guarantees and Chinese infrastructure finance, now available to military juntas, most visibly through the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) and the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS. The study further demonstrates that coups in Francophone West Africa are embedded in intensifying geo-economic contestation between a Franco-American bloc and a Russia–China axis, exemplified by the contested Nigeria–Morocco Gas Pipeline. While Nigeria's peacekeeping and mediation efforts were judged effective by a majority of respondents (45–60 per cent, varying by stakeholder group) in managing the immediate consequences of coups, they showed limited long-term effectiveness in addressing recurrence. The study concludes that Nigeria must transition from institutional reliance and normative rigidity toward adaptive, multipolar diplomacy combining pragmatic engagement with juntas, strategic engagement with external powers, long-term peacebuilding investment, and comprehensive ECOWAS institutional reform.

Keywords: Military coups, Nigeria foreign policy, West Africa, ECOWAS, Regional security, Peacekeeping, Geopolitics, Alliance of Sahel States.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21869736>

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1. INTRODUCTION

Political unrest and military coups have long featured in Africa's post-colonial political trajectory, but after a relative decline through the 1990s and 2000s, the phenomenon has resurged sharply since 2020. West Africa alone accounted for approximately 65 per cent of all coups and coup attempts recorded on the continent between 1950 and 2023 (African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes [ACCORD], 2023). The overthrow of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta in Mali in August 2020, followed by a second coup in May 2021, marked a significant turning point; it was followed by the ouster of President Alpha Condé in Guinea (September 2021), the removal of President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré in Burkina Faso (January 2022, followed by a further coup in September 2022), the detention of President Mohamed Bazoum in Niger (July 2023), and a military takeover in Gabon (August 2023).

This resurgence poses acute challenges for Nigeria, a nation with its own history of military rule that has, since 1999, positioned itself as West Africa's principal advocate for democratic governance and the primary institutional anchor of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). A coup in a neighbouring state does not merely alter that state's internal governance; it strains diplomatic ties, raises the spectre of political contagion through refugee flows and cross-border insurgency, and tests the credibility of the regional norms Nigeria has championed (Bach, 2018; Abdulai, 2022). Although Nigeria, generally acting through ECOWAS, has deployed sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and mediation in response to successive coups, these measures have produced mixed outcomes and, in several cases, failed to restore constitutional order.

Existing scholarship on West African coups has predominantly examined their domestic political dynamics, elite competition, civil-society response, and human-rights consequences while comparatively neglecting the broader regional and foreign-policy implications for Nigeria specifically, particularly amid intensifying geopolitical competition between Western powers and a resurgent Russia–China axis in the Sahel (Dibie, 2020; Ojo, 2017). This gap is analytically significant: the interconnectedness of West African states through shared borders, security architecture, and economic ties means that Nigeria's diplomatic recalibration in response to coups has consequences for the entire regional order, not merely for bilateral relations with individual coup-affected states.

This study therefore examines Nigeria's foreign policy responses to military coups in West Africa between 2020 and 2025, guided by five objectives: (i) to analyse the pattern of Nigeria's responses to coups within the period; (ii) to identify the key foreign policy instruments Nigeria has employed within ECOWAS in addressing coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and the Republic of Benin; (iii) to evaluate the effectiveness of these

responses in restoring constitutional order and regional stability; (iv) to examine the factors that have constrained or facilitated Nigeria's responses; and (v) to propose strategies for strengthening Nigeria's foreign policy toward unconstitutional changes of government in the sub-region.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopts an eclectic theoretical framework combining Political Instability Theory and Realist Theory of International Relations, selected for their complementary explanatory power over the domestic and systemic dimensions of the coup phenomenon respectively.

Political Instability Theory holds that military coups arise from weak, illegitimate, or dysfunctional state institutions that fail to manage societal conflict, deliver public goods, or sustain the rule of law (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2019; North, 1990), and that such instability is inherently transnational, capable of spilling across borders through refugee movements, arms flows, and insurgent expansion (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Salehyan, 2009). Applied to this study, the theory explains why coups in Mali and Burkina Faso have raised Nigerian security concerns extending well beyond bilateral diplomacy, and why political stability is treated as a collective good requiring institutional frameworks such as ECOWAS to manage (Bach, 2016; Fawcett, 2016). Its central limitation, however, is a degree of determinism that understates the agency of states and regional bodies in shaping outcomes, and an underweighting of external great-power influence a gap this study addresses by pairing it with Realist Theory.

Realist Theory emphasises power dynamics and national interest as the principal determinants of state behaviour, positing that shifts in the regional balance of power such as those produced by coups compel neighbouring states to reassess alliances and foreign policy postures in defence of their strategic interests. Within this study, Realist Theory illuminates why Nigeria's responses to coups cannot be read purely as normative democracy-promotion but must also be understood as calculated manoeuvres to preserve regional hegemony amid the entry of alternative external patrons, Russia and China, into a space historically dominated by Western and Nigerian influence. Taken together, the two theories allow the study to explain both the domestic-institutional origins of coups (Political Instability Theory) and the great-power competition that increasingly conditions their regional consequences and Nigeria's room for manoeuvre in responding to them (Realist Theory).

3. BRIEF REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A substantial literature documents the historical trajectory of West African coups and Nigeria's regional leadership role. Adebajo (2013, 2020a, 2021) traces Nigeria's peacekeeping and mediation record from the ECOMOG interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone through to its contemporary, more constrained position within ECOWAS,

arguing that Nigeria's leadership has historically rested on a combination of economic weight, institutional centrality, and alignment with Western democratic norms, each of which is examined in this study as increasingly contested. Adeleke (2022b) and Afolabi (2022b) specifically link the resurgence of coups to strain in Nigeria's diplomatic relations, while Adetola (2020) and Ajayi (2019) examine the role of ECOWAS as an institutional vehicle for managing unconstitutional changes of government, generally finding inconsistent application of sanctions between military coups and constitutional manipulation by incumbent presidents.

A newer strand of literature situates West African coups within intensifying great-power competition. Akinola and Makombe (2024) and Kohnert (2022) document Russia's cultivation of military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger through security guarantees and disinformation operations, while Ojewale (2024) analyses Russian influence strategy in the Sahel more broadly. This geopolitical literature is directly relevant to the present study's finding that the Nigeria–Morocco Gas Pipeline project has become entangled in proxy competition between a Franco-American bloc and a Russia–China axis, elevating the strategic significance of transit states such as Niger. The Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2023) provides complementary evidence on youth unemployment and governance failure as structural drivers of coup susceptibility, evidence this study draws upon in its recommendations for long-term peacebuilding.

Despite this substantial body of work, few studies integrate the domestic-institutional analysis of coup causation with a systematic, elite-interview-based assessment of Nigeria's actual diplomatic, institutional, and peacekeeping responses across the full 2020–2025 coup wave, and fewer still explicitly theorise the geopolitical dimension of Nigeria's declining regional leverage. The present study addresses this gap by combining Political Instability Theory and Realist Theory with rich qualitative evidence from stakeholders directly involved in formulating, executing, and analysing Nigeria's responses.

4. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study employed an *ex post facto* qualitative research design, appropriate for exploring the complex, evolving phenomenon of Nigeria's foreign policy responses to coups that have already occurred, and for capturing the perspectives and specialised knowledge of elite informants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data triangulation combined primary elite interviews with secondary documentary sources, including policy reports, news coverage, and institutional publications.

The accessible population was derived from verifiable institutional data: the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs (over 1,643 staff, with substantial representation in West African missions), the Nigerian military (over 2,200 senior officers), the ECOWAS Commission (approximately 570 professional staff), and the African Union Commission, yielding an accessible population of approximately 125–200 relevant individuals across five stakeholder categories. From this population, 50 participants were purposively selected using a weighted distribution reflecting each group's centrality to Nigeria's coup-

response formulation and execution: Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials (n = 10), military generals with regional security exposure (n = 9), parliamentarians on foreign affairs committees (n = 8), academic scholars and historians (n = 6), think tank analysts (n = 6), journalists covering ECOWAS/diplomacy (n = 6), and senior bureaucrats in early-warning and conflict-prevention roles (n = 5).

Table 1. Sample distribution of elite interview participants

Participant Category	Justification for Weighting	n
Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials	Primary architects of diplomatic strategy	10
Military generals (regional security/peacekeeping)	Security–military nexus and peacekeeping implications	9
Parliamentarians (foreign affairs committees)	Political and legislative dimensions of foreign policy	8
Academic scholars and historians	Historical and theoretical framing	6
Think tank analysts	Independent, policy-oriented analysis	6
Journalists (ECOWAS/diplomacy beat)	Media and public discourse perspectives	6
Senior bureaucrats (early warning/conflict prevention)	Operational knowledge of prevention systems	5
Total		50

Source: Authors' compilation, adapted from the study's sampling framework.

Semi-structured elite interviews, guided by a pre-tested interview instrument covering perceptions of the coups, their implications for Nigerian foreign policy, changes in diplomatic relations, and recommendations for regional cooperation, were conducted in person or via secure online platforms between November and December 2024, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim.

Content, construct, and face validity were established through expert review by scholars of African politics, military studies, and international relations, alongside pilot testing; reliability was strengthened through methodological triangulation, inter-rater comparison of thematic coding, and pilot testing procedures. Data were analysed thematically, with responses coded, categorised by stakeholder group, and quantified descriptively (frequency and percentage of respondents endorsing particular positions)

to allow structured comparison across the seven stakeholder categories, alongside verbatim illustrative quotations. Ethical procedures followed informed consent, confidentiality through alphanumeric participant coding, minimisation of harm, and institutional ethical approval, consistent with established qualitative research ethics protocols.

5. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents findings organised around the study's central research questions, drawing on the coded responses of the 45–50 respondents who addressed each theme, supported by illustrative interview excerpts and cross-referenced against the documentary record of the 2020–2025 coup wave.

5.1 The 2020–2025 West African coup wave

Table 2 summarises the documented successful military coups in West Africa during the period under review, establishing the empirical backdrop against which Nigeria's foreign policy responses are assessed.

Table 2. Successful military coups in West Africa, 2020–2023

Country	Date	Overthrown Leader	Principal Stated Reasons
Mali	August 2020	Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta	Political instability, corruption, security challenges
Mali	May 2021	Bah N'Daw (transitional govt.)	Continued dissatisfaction with governance and security
Guinea	September 2021	Alpha Condé	Authoritarian rule and electoral disputes
Burkina Faso	January 2022	Roch Marc Christian Kaboré	Rising insecurity and public protests
Niger	July 2023	Mohamed Bazoum	Economic difficulties and security concerns
Gabon	August 2023	Ali Bongo	Allegations of electoral fraud

Source: Adapted from the study's documentary compilation (2026), corroborated with Al Jazeera, BBC News, and International Crisis Group reporting.

5.2 Impact on Nigeria's diplomatic relations with neighbours

All 45 respondents who addressed this question (100%) agreed that the coup resurgence has affected Nigeria's diplomatic relations, though views diverged on severity. A majority described significant diplomatic strain: as one Ministry of Foreign Affairs official

observed, the shift toward non-democratic governance in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea has complicated Nigeria's diplomatic efforts "especially considering Nigeria's strong commitment to democracy and good governance." A smaller group of respondents, including several ECOWAS officials, characterised Nigeria's approach as one of pragmatic, sustained dialogue that keeps channels open for peacebuilding even without endorsing the takeovers. Table 3 presents the distributional breakdown by stakeholder category.

Table 3. Perceived impact of military coups on Nigeria's diplomatic relations with neighbours (by respondent category)

Respondent Type	Significant Impact (%)	Minimal Impact (%)	No Impact (%)
Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials	45	55	0
Military generals (regional security)	42	58	0
ECOWAS Commission officials	50	50	0
Think tank analysts	38	62	0
Journalists covering ECOWAS	40	60	0

Source: Elite interview survey data, 2026.

Notably, no respondent in any category selected "no impact," indicating unanimous acknowledgement that coups have consequences for Nigeria's diplomacy, even where views diverge on magnitude and durability. ECOWAS Commission officials registered the highest proportion selecting "significant impact" (50%), consistent with their proximity to the institutional strain the coups have generated. At the same time, think tank analysts were most likely to characterise the impact as minimal (62%), reflecting an analytical emphasis on Nigeria's demonstrated capacity to sustain engagement despite disruption. Consistent with Proposition 1 as tested in the study, the balance of evidence refutes the claim that coups have not significantly affected Nigeria's diplomatic relations: the majority of respondents across every stakeholder category identified meaningful diplomatic strain, even as they also credited Nigerian diplomacy with preventing complete ruptures.

5.3 Impact on Nigeria's role within ECOWAS and the African Union

Respondents were markedly more unified in identifying a diminution of Nigerian regional influence than in assessing bilateral diplomatic strain. Table 4 shows that between 40 and 55 per cent of respondents across all five reporting categories perceived diminished

Nigerian influence within ECOWAS and the AU, with think tank analysts (55%) and scholars or historians (50%) most likely to attribute this to the rise of competing regional powers and external actors.

Table 4. Effect of military coups on Nigeria's role within ECOWAS and the African Union (by respondent category)

Respondent Type	Diminished Influence (%)	Moderate Influence (%)	No Change (%)
Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials	40	50	10
ECOWAS Commission officials	45	45	10
Think tank analysts	55	40	5
Scholars and historians	50	35	15
Military generals (regional security)	45	50	5

Source: Elite interview survey data, 2026.

Qualitative accounts attributed this diminished influence to internal divisions within ECOWAS over how to treat military regimes, the entrenchment of Sahelian juntas through alternative patronage (notably Russian security cooperation and Chinese infrastructure finance), and the emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) formed by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger following their withdrawal from ECOWAS as a rival regional architecture. Military generals were comparatively more likely to affirm Nigeria's continued centrality in regional peacekeeping and security coordination (45% moderate influence, 50%), suggesting that Nigeria's operational security role has proven more resilient than its normative and institutional leadership.

5.4 Effectiveness of Nigeria's peacekeeping and mediation efforts

Table 5 presents respondents' assessments of the effectiveness of Nigeria's peacekeeping and mediation interventions in response to the coup wave. Military generals (60%) and ECOWAS Commission officials (55%) rated these efforts most positively, citing the criticality of early intervention despite resource and coordination constraints. In contrast, Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials were comparatively more circumspect, with 50 per cent judging effectiveness limited by inconsistent regional support.

Table 5. Effectiveness of Nigeria's peacekeeping and mediation efforts (by respondent category)

Respondent Type	Effective (%)	Limited Effectiveness (%)	No Effectiveness (%)
Military generals (regional security)	60	35	5
ECOWAS Commission officials	55	40	5
Scholars and historians	50	40	10
Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials	45	50	5
Think tank analysts	55	40	5

Source: Elite interview survey data, 2026.

The convergent qualitative theme across all stakeholder groups was that Nigeria's peacekeeping and mediation architecture is essential but structurally under-resourced and inconsistently coordinated across ECOWAS member states, producing effective short-term crisis management but limited long-term deterrence, consistent with the recurrence of coups across the study period despite sustained Nigerian mediation. This finding informed the study's evaluation of Proposition 3, that Nigeria's responses have been moderately effective in restoring constitutional order but less effective in ensuring long-term regional stability, a proposition the evidence broadly supports.

5.5 The geopolitical dimension: great-power competition and the Sahel

A cross-cutting and analytically significant finding, emerging from both elite interviews and documentary analysis, is that the coups in Francophone West Africa cannot be adequately explained without reference to intensifying geo-economic contestation between a Franco-American bloc and a Russia–China axis. The Nigeria–Morocco Gas Pipeline, conceived as a Western-aligned initiative to diversify European energy supply away from Russia, has elevated the strategic significance of transit states, particularly Niger, making them targets of Russian influence operations aimed at undermining Western energy security. The availability of Russian security guarantees and Chinese infrastructure finance has enabled Sahelian juntas to withstand ECOWAS sanctions that would previously have compelled compliance. At the same time, the AES's formation and its members' imposition of tariffs on ECOWAS goods signal the emergence of a genuine alternative regional architecture rather than mere defiance.

5.6 Constraining and facilitating factors

Beyond the descriptive impact findings, the study identified specific mechanisms constraining and facilitating Nigeria's foreign policy responses, which together explain what respondents termed Nigeria's regional "paradox": a hegemon with diminished leverage. Nigeria's rapid diplomatic and security response to the attempted destabilisation of Benin in 2025, described by one military general as involving special forces on alert and diplomats engaging within hours, demonstrated continued Nigerian capacity to shape outcomes where its intervention is welcomed. By contrast, Nigeria's inability to meaningfully influence developments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger reflects four converging constraints identified across interviews.

The first and most consequential is a geopolitical substitution effect: Sahelian juntas now have access to Russian security guarantees and Chinese infrastructure finance offered without the political conditionality attached to Nigerian or ECOWAS engagement, fundamentally altering the juntas' cost-benefit calculation around compliance. As one think tank analyst put it, juntas now calculate that they can survive without Nigeria, but not without their new external partners. Second, anti-Western sentiment spillover has complicated Nigeria's position. Although Nigeria is not France, its strategic partnerships with the United States and Britain have made it vulnerable to juntas' anti-colonial rhetoric, which implicitly targets all Western-aligned states and allows military regimes to frame ECOWAS intervention as externally orchestrated interference. Third, energy interdependence has itself become weaponised, with Niger's junta demonstrating willingness to disrupt energy supplies to Nigeria while pursuing Russian alternatives, a striking reversal of the traditional pattern of Nigerian economic leverage over its neighbours. Fourth, ECOWAS's own legitimacy crisis, rooted in the inconsistent application of sanctions to coup leaders relative to incumbent presidents who manipulate constitutions to extend their tenure, has eroded the collective institutional authority on which Nigerian leadership has historically depended. In contrast, Nigeria's own domestic security burdens insurgency in the northeast and banditry in the northwest constrain its capacity to project military force externally.

These constraining factors were partially offset by facilitating ones: Nigeria's continued economic and military weight within the sub-region, its diplomatic capital accumulated through decades of ECOWAS leadership, and its demonstrated capacity for rapid response where political conditions allow, as the Benin case illustrates. This pattern Proposition 4 in the study's framework was substantially supported by the evidence: Nigeria's responses have been constrained by domestic challenges and shifting regional dynamics, while remaining facilitated by its hegemonic position and diplomatic capital, even as the balance between these forces has shifted unfavourably since 2020.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings extend the political economy and international relations literature on West African coups in three principal ways. First, they provide systematic, cross-stakeholder empirical confirmation of what much prior scholarship has argued more impressionistically: that the resurgence of coups has measurably strained Nigeria's diplomatic relations with affected neighbours (Adebajo, 2020c; Adeleke, 2022b), while simultaneously demonstrating through the near-universal absence of "no impact" responses alongside majority endorsement of continued Nigerian diplomatic engagement that this strain has not produced complete diplomatic rupture. This nuance refines binary characterisations in the literature of Nigerian responses as either failed or successful, pointing instead toward a pattern of contained, managed strain.

Second, the finding that Nigeria's institutional influence within ECOWAS and the AU has been more consistently perceived as diminished than its bilateral diplomatic standing is theoretically significant. Read through the lens of Political Instability Theory, this suggests that the transnational contagion of institutional fragility identified by Acemoglu and Robinson (2019) and Collier and Hoeffler (2004) has outpaced ECOWAS's institutional capacity to manage it collectively, producing exactly the internal divisions respondents identified. Read through the lens of Realist Theory, however, the finding takes on an additional dimension: Nigeria's declining institutional leverage is not simply a function of ECOWAS's internal weakness but of the emergence of credible alternative patrons, Russia and China, that have altered the cost-benefit calculus facing Sahelian juntas contemplating compliance with ECOWAS sanctions. This corroborates and extends Akinola and Makombe's (2024) and Kohnert's (2022) analyses of Russian strategic engagement in the Sahel by demonstrating its direct institutional consequences for Nigerian regional leadership, as reported by elite Nigerian and regional stakeholders themselves.

Third, the study's evidence on peacekeeping and mediation effectiveness, rated positively by a majority in every stakeholder category yet consistently limited in long-term impact, supports a more precise theoretical claim than either wholesale endorsement or wholesale critique of Nigerian regional leadership would allow: Nigerian interventions are effective at crisis containment but insufficient to address the structural, economic, and institutional drivers of coup recurrence identified by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2023). This distinction matters directly for policy, since it implies that continued investment in peacekeeping capacity alone, without complementary investment in long-term peacebuilding and institutional reform, is likely to reproduce the same pattern of short-term stabilization and long-term recurrence documented across the 2020–2023 coup wave.

Overall, these results bolster the core hypothesis of the study: Nigeria's foreign policy towards coup-affected West Africa cannot be fully explained by institutional or normative factors alone. Instead, it must be seen within the context of a growing

multipolar and contested regional landscape, where military juntas have viable alternatives to solutions mediated by Nigeria and ECOWAS. This marks a significant departure from the unipolar assumptions often found in earlier literature on Nigerian regional dominance (Adebajo, 2010, 2020a).

7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

First, develop flexible diplomatic strategies for a multipolar region. Nigeria should institutionalize a pragmatic diplomatic framework that includes a dedicated Special Envoy for Sahelian Affairs. This framework should distinguish normative opposition to unconstitutional governance from operational engagement with military juntas, prioritize functional security cooperation (particularly counterterrorism along Nigeria's northern borders) that transcends political differences, and establish structured bilateral dialogue with Russia and China that clearly demarcates acceptable cooperation from unacceptable support for unconstitutional governance.

Second, recalibrate leadership within ECOWAS and pursue institutional reform. Given the evidence of inconsistent application of sanctions, including harsh responses to coups and tolerance of constitutional manipulation by incumbent presidents, Nigeria should table a comprehensive ECOWAS Reform Protocol mandating consistent democratic sanctions, strengthen the ECOWAS Conflict Early Warning Mechanism (ECOWARN) with dedicated funding, and champion an ECOWAS Mediation Support Unit capable of preventive rather than purely reactive diplomacy.

Third, invest in long-term peacebuilding. Evidence indicates that peacekeeping alone addresses symptoms rather than causes. Nigeria should establish a Nigeria–West Africa Stability Fund to finance youth employment, agricultural development, and infrastructure in coup-vulnerable border regions, and champion ECOWAS-wide adoption of Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative standards as a condition for regional trade preferences, directly targeting the governance failures and economic grievances identified as structural coup drivers.

Fourth, enhance peacekeeping capacity and regional security cooperation. Nigeria should establish a dedicated Rapid Response Brigade for Sahelian counter-insurgency operations, operationalize the ECOWAS Standby Force through joint training and harmonized rules of engagement, and institutionalize civil–military cooperation mechanisms that integrate local government, traditional rulers, and civil society into security planning.

Fifth, engage strategically with external powers and pursue energy diplomacy in the national interest. Nigeria should establish a Geopolitical Strategy Directorate to monitor external actors' engagement in West Africa, pursue Track 1.5 dialogue with Russia while maintaining clear red lines, deepen the Nigeria–China Strategic Partnership with robust local-content and transparency provisions, and commission a Strategic Energy Infrastructure Review to evaluate pipeline options, including diversification through floating LNG, against their exposure to Sahelian instability and geopolitical entanglement.

8. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the resurgence of military coups in West Africa between 2020 and 2025 has produced a fundamental transformation in Nigeria's regional foreign policy posture, shifting from institutional hegemony asserted through ECOWAS protocols, sanctions, and peacekeeping toward a more pragmatic, bilaterally calibrated engagement that increasingly acknowledges the limits of coercive diplomacy against juntas with viable external alternatives.

Nigeria's diplomatic relations with coup-affected neighbors have been significantly, though not irreparably, strained; internal divisions and external great-power competition have measurably diminished its institutional influence within ECOWAS and the African Union; and its peacekeeping and mediation efforts, while broadly judged effective for immediate crisis management, have shown limited capacity to prevent recurrence. Critically, the study establishes that this regional political transformation is inseparable from the intensifying geo-economic contestation between Western and Russia–China-aligned blocs, exemplified by the contested Nigeria–Morocco Gas Pipeline and the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States. Restoring effective Nigerian regional leadership will require a comprehensive, adaptive strategy that combines pragmatic engagement with military regimes, calibrated engagement with competing external powers, sustained investment in long-term peacebuilding, and fundamental ECOWAS institutional reform, an agenda this study's findings and recommendations are intended to inform.

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